

Witch 461

Chapter 461: Respective Beliefs

It was the strangest group of people Rene Medde had ever seen.

A detailed map of Longsong Stronghold was spread open on the square table in the lobby on the castle's first floor.

Six people surrounded the table, including Commander of the First Army Iron Axe, Police Chief of Border Town Vader, the current leader of Ragingfire Crack, head of Security Bureau Nightingale, dark-haired witch Ashes, and Earl of the Elk Family himself.

Rene never expected that he would need the help of Rats one day, let alone cooperate with witches.

"My lords, there're about seven or eight different gangs in Stronghold," Crack said, bowing and smiling ingratiatingly. "Sickle Gang, situated in the northern outer city, is the largest group with 500 to 600 members, but Knell Gang, in the inner city, is the most powerful. Knell consists mostly of escaped convicts and mercenaries and rarely accepts commoners as its members, and they have more than enough swords and armor, which is why they control the most lucrative area."

"The eastern city belongs to Dead Flesh Eaters and Vulture Gang, who sell slaves and Dreamland Water through the harbor area through extremely cruel means. It's rumored that these two Rat organizations are backed by the Wolf and Maple Leaf families, but when our Ragingfire totally defeated them a couple years ago, no great nobles stepped up to help them." He said with a tinge of pride.

"As for the western city, the gangs are much more complicated... Since they are all small gangs, I've only interacted with their leaders. They are..."

"Information about gangs isn't important, so you don't have to go into details." The tall Mojin man interrupted. "I only want to know if you can take us into the lairs of these underground Rats?"

"Ahem, my lord..." Crack nodded towards him. "A common saying goes, 'The lairs of Rats are riddled with caves and holes'. I know the main gathering points of all the gangs, but I don't know every single one of their shelters, especially the hiding places in dried wells and basements, so I can only rely on leaders and cronies to find the specific spots."

"He's right about that." Rene sighed. "If we went face to face with the Rats, they wouldn't stand a chance, but it'll be much more difficult to clear them all out."

"We might have a chance of success if we launch a surprise attack, but now that the notice has been announced, the leaders will all hide away by the time we act."

"Hide?" The dark-haired witch laughed. "Unless they hide in Redwater City, if they'll have to stay in Stronghold, there's no way we won't find them here."

"Yes, you're right." Crack wiped the sweat off his forehead and didn't argue further.

The witch named Ashes gave off a terrifying feeling of pressure. Rene had been in battle and fought demonic beasts in Hermes, so he knew what a true warrior should be like... But even soldiers in the Judgement Army, who had faced hundreds of battles, would falter in front of her. She didn't need to make some scary expression because even when she was simply standing, no one could dare to look into her eyes.

There was no doubt that she had not only seen blood and slain enemies but also hovered between life and death. That was why she had such a menacing aura.

"His Highness has given us three days to prepare. When the first batch of rations is distributed, the army will begin from the western city gate and clean up the Rat gangs in all the areas." Iron Axe said quietly, "This mission is targeting only the organizers so that we can take down the Black Street as quickly as possible."

"But... will this really work?" Rene couldn't help asking as Iron Axe walked towards the entrance of the lobby. "No city has been able to get rid of the Rats. As long as the citizens exist, so will they."

Iron Axe turned around and glanced at him. "Is that so? Border Town doesn't have any Rats."

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Everyone left, and only Vader was left.

"Earl, has anyone applied to be a policeman yet?"

"Not yet... but I heard from Petrov that dozens of people in the Second Army have signed up for it." Rene sat down slowly next to the table with Iron Axe's words still ringing in his ears. After a while, he whispered, "Are there really no Rats in the town?"

"If you mean the conventional Black Street organizations, then there aren't any." Vader shrugged. "No man or woman has to worry about food or shelter, and everyone can find a suitable job. Even the salary from doing odd jobs is enough to feed themselves. Honestly, before I went to Border Town, I didn't believe that a place like that could exist in the Kingdom of Graycastle either."

"Why?" Rene couldn't help asking.

"I don't know, my lord..." Vader splayed his hands. "His Highness Roland is capable of things that are far beyond any other noblemen I have known."

"No need to call me lord." Rene waved his hand. "His Highness wants us to work together, so we can put our titles aside for now."

Vader nodded and didn't protest. Rene admired Vader's frankness. "Do you think the prince can really eliminate all the Rats in Stronghold and purify the entire Western Region?"

"I'm not sure either." Vader's answer surprised him. "After all, I used to be a Patrol Leader and interacted with Rats for many years. Their existence was like the shadows under the sun, so blunt force might not be that effective. His Highness once said that if he was dealing with a large city with millions of people, he might not be able to take care of everything. But if there were only ten thousand people, he might be able to get rid of these bottom-feeding scums. Basically, he plans to make people realize that it's too risky to become a Rat and there're many other better options."

"Too... risky?" Rene ignored the statement about millions of people because even a city with ten thousand people was already unbelievable. "This will take a pretty long time to achieve."

"That's right, targeting Rats or crime can't be done in one day," Vader said and nodded. "That's why His Highness Roland established the police force. I told you before that this organization is completely different from a patrol team."

It was really different. They reported to the City Hall rather than the noble and maintained order in an area rather than conspire with criminals.

"And most importantly, His Highness told me one more thing."

"What did he tell you?"

"I actually had the same concerns as you do now," Vader said with a smile, "but His Highness asked, 'So you won't try because it's hard?'"

Rene Medde felt a sense of realization rush into his heart. If he did not try because it was hard, he would not have been relentlessly pursuing his knighthood. Although he inherited the title of Earl and felt like he was straying from his desired life, as long as he could continue to fight for the people, he would be still following the path in his heart. Now, this path was becoming even wider.

"Now... I understand." He took a deep breath.

"I was just as shocked as you." Vader recalled. "But I don't understand what His Highness said next."

"Did he say anything else?" Rene asked excitedly.

"Uh-huh," Vader said, stroking his chin. "he said 'you'll feel incredibly fulfilled after drinking this bowl of chicken broth.' But... what does it have to do with chicken broth?"

Chapter 462: The Determination

Joe fell ill.

He was the second weakest in the group before Paper was kidnapped, and since then he had become the weakest. Joe was fine the night he came back from the square. But the next day, Snaketooth found him lying motionless on the hay, moaning vaguely and with bright red cheeks.

"He was infected by the cold plague," Sunflower said while touching Joe's head, "and his head is burning hot."

"Will I... die?"

Joe, squinting his eyes, asked softly.

No one answered.

The cold plague was an extremely stubborn disease, and once contracted, you can only rely on the body to resist the infection. However, people who were physically fit seldom suffered from the cold—those

who were infected were generally weak, so very few patients could survive it. It was essentially a death sentence for Rats.

"I'll go and look for Kanas," said Snaketooth, breaking the silence.

"What do you want him for?"

"To beg him to give Joe more food." He stood up. "I've heard that the chance of survival is greater if the patient is kept warm and adequately fed."

"He won't give you any food," Tigerclaw shook his head and said. "We all know what kind of person he is."

"Exactly, you may even get beaten up by him," Sunflower said while gathering hay. "Rats never feed any useless person."

"Joe isn't useless." Snaketooth retorted. "He can read!"

"Just a few words, and of what use is that to Kanas? He wants people who can steal and rob others."

"..." Snaketooth clenched his teeth, turned around and walked towards the manager's room in the Endless Lane. He had to try even if he would be beaten up by Kanas with a stick.

Surprisingly, Kanas was not back yet.

"You're lucky." When he brought the message back to his companions, Tigerclaw grinned. "Or we may have to take care of another one."

Sunflower sighed. "Each of us will give a portion of our bread to Joe later when it's time for the bread distribution so that he can eat more."

However, Snaketooth did not feel lucky at all. He could feel something was not right.

"It'd only take half an hour to send the message to Bloodyhand. It's understandable that Bloodyhand didn't come back last night due to the discussion of countermeasures—but it's already noon, the discussion should have been finished by now." Furthermore, when his men opened the door, he took a peek and realized Kanas and his lover were both missing.

The gang started to distribute food not long after, and Snaketooth realized that it was distributed by Kanas' confidant.

What he received was nothing but half a slice of brown bread.

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After four days, Joe's condition was still deteriorating.

He was yelling that he felt cold yesterday, but he couldn't speak a word today. His once pink cheeks started to turn pale and his breathing was getting weaker.

"We've tried our best," Sunflower said languidly with her hand on her stomach.

They had given half of their food to Joe in the past few days. If it was not for them, he might not have lived this long. Tigerclaw, who used to be very energetic, was starting to look feeble as well.

Kanas had not shown up these past few days.

More than a hundred Rats gathered in the room and started to discuss this matter. But it was just a discussion—after all, they were still getting food as usual. However, it was especially noisy today.

It was the day of free food distribution, as announced.

"I'll go to the square," after a long contemplation, Snaketooth clenched his teeth and said. "We need to eat more than just bread. Joe might be able to last if I could get a bowl of hot oatmeal for him."

"Are you crazy?" Sunflower stared at him and said, "Don't forget how Kanas warned us. Do you really want to get stitches on your lips?"

"That's if he knows I snuck out. We don't even know where Kanas is now. What if the lord of the city is really going to attack them?"

"But his men are still here. Do you think they'll let you off if they find out?" Sunflower looked at Tigerclaw. "Don't just stand there. Help me to talk him out of this."

"I'll go with you," the latter said suddenly.

"Both of you..."

"This food distribution may have already been ruined. Or perhaps there's no food at all, and it's simply the noble's act of disguising it. I suppose it shouldn't be considered disobeying Kanas' warnings in this case?" Tigerclaw twitched his lips and said, "I'm strong—I can run there and back while carrying Joe on my back, and it won't take us too long. Kanas isn't around now and his confidants are hiding in his room roasting themselves in front of the fire. No one will notice us."

"Um..." Sunflower hesitated.

"You just stay here," Snaketooth said, "so you can cover for us in case anyone asks. Just say we have diarrhea and had to go to find a sheltered place to relieve ourselves. No worries. We won't need long to rush back from there."

"Well, then," she looked around and said, "hurry up!"

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Snaketooth and Tigerclaw snuck out of the log cabin, running all the way down the alley. The elevated snow under their feet drenched their trousers. Even though the cold wind that blew into their face felt as sharp as a knife, it couldn't stop them. Panting while arriving at the square, they found that there were almost a thousand people surrounding the podium.

Oatmeal really was being distributed!

Both of them ran over quickly, but were stopped by two guards in brown uniforms. "Walk slowly, no pushing, and no cutting in line—otherwise you'll be prohibited from receiving any free food."

Snaketooth noticed that there was a wooden fence set up around the center of the podium. The crowd was moving along the fence in a line like a folded dragon. Guards armed with strange iron bars could be seen at every short interval. They looked like the defenders of order, because people were expelled from the line from time to time.

"My friend is sick... Can you help us, please? I'm begging you!" Snaketooth knelt down on the snowy ground.

"He's been starving for days. He's in need of food urgently!" Tigerclaw knelt down beside him.

"What kind of illness?"

"It's... the cold plague."

One of them reached out to Joe who was unconscious and said, "Leave him with me. Both of you get in line."

"Erm..."

"He knows the way back, doesn't he?" the other guard said, "Even if he doesn't know, you can always come back here to look for him."

While saying this, the guard walked away with Joe on his shoulders.

"What should we do?" Both of them stared at each other. No one expected it to turn out like this—according to their plans, the other party would either be totally indifferent or let them bypass the fence to get the oatmeal in advance.

"Let's go back first." Snaketooth decided after some short contemplation.

"What... Go back?" Tigerclaw asked with surprise, "No oatmeal?"

"It'll take us at least half an hour to get there with this line. There might be trouble if we take too long," he nodded and said. "We can sneak out again in the evening to bring Joe back."

Tigerclaw looked at the oatmeal on the wooden table and said reluctantly, "Okay... then."

There was something that Snaketooth kept to himself—since the announcement of the free food distribution had come true, did it mean that the other two rumors would eventually pan out as well?

He vaguely felt that an upheaval might be coming towards the Black Street.

Back at the Endless Lane, both of them tiptoed into the house but were caught by surprise.

Sunflower was hung in front of the entrance with both her hands tied behind her back, standing on a shaky wooden bench. Bruises could be seen on her face. All the while, Kanas' men were standing by her side, sneering at both of them.

"You, finally back with a well-fed stomach?"

Chapter 463: The Elimination of Bloodyhand Gang

Snaketooth's heart sank rapidly.

"Let...go..." Fear seized his throat. He opened his mouth but could only rasp in a dull voice.

"You mean 'let go of her'? Alright." The man kicked the stool below Sunflower's feet, her body stiffened instantly. The rope dug into Sunflower's neck. She kicked her feet in panic, clenched and released her tied hands, but none of these helped.

Tigerclaw rushed forward to help, but his head was struck from behind with a stick and he fell to the floor.

"If we hadn't been waiting for you, I'd have killed her earlier." One of Kanas' henchmen sneered. "What a good excuse, diarrhea! You probably don't know, but we've had people watching you. He knows that mutts aren't disciplined. We knew we'd have to teach you a lesson to ensure you abide by the rules of the Bloodyhand Gang."

"It's my fault." Snaketooth knelt down. "Please let her go! She never even stepped out of this room!"

"This little b*tch lied to me," the henchman shrugged. "She swore you were just looking for shelter from the wind. Even with her two teeth knocked out, she wouldn't change her story. Why would I want her alive? So she can get back at me?"

"They want to kill us." Snaketooth came to the sudden realization. He struggled to raise his head, seeing that Sunflower's struggle was getting weaker and her body had begun to stiffen. He forced himself not to look at her, but instead paying attention to the dagger hanging at the waist of the man. He was only six steps away. If Snaketooth could rush up and get that dagger...

Suddenly, the rope broke.

Sunflower fell to the floor silently.

"What the hell..." The henchman frowned, but before he could finish his words, a line of blood spouted from his neck, spraying the face of the closest Rat.

Snaketooth stared at the scene in front of him.

Meanwhile, sounds of a fight came from the outer room.

"Stop! This is the Bloodyhand Gang's territory!"

"Some... somebody broke in!"

"Oh... my hand!"

"Damn it. Come out and kill her!"

"Mon... monster! Help..."

Kanas' followers looked at each other and pulled out their weapons. Before they could escape, an apparition flew in and overthrew the two front men.

Snaketooth then saw the attacker—a striking woman with black hair casually tied into a ponytail at the back of her head. She was wearing a long black gown and her eyes were golden. Snaketooth felt his blood freeze when she cast a glance at him.

"Drop your weapon, put your hands over your head and kneel down. If you want to live." The woman stuck out three fingers. "I will count to three. Anyone who doesn't follow my instruction will die."

"Three."

There were only a few seconds of silence before someone shouted, "God, such skills... she must be worth 100 gold royals!"

"Everybody, let's move!"

"Catch her and boss will definitely reward us well!"

"Catch her alive!"

"Never mind. You'd be better dead." She held up a giant, oddly-shaped ornate sword and charged into the crowd. Snaketooth couldn't believe his eyes. The sword was made of cast iron, and whatever it touched shattered instantly. She moved at such a fast speed that her enemies' lime powder and crossbows were barely useful. The once effective hidden weapons couldn't hit the target now. The crowd could not escape from her, let alone fight back.

"Protect your friend, child," a voice came but the source of the voice was nowhere to be seen.

He swallowed his saliva and crawled to Sunflower's side in panic. He put his hand to her nostrils to feel her breath.

She faintly exhaled warm air... she was still alive!

Snaketooth felt like crying, the happiness of having survived overwhelmed him.

What was written on the announcement was real. These people had been sent by the prince to eliminate organizers of the gang! Now they had hope!

Bending over Sunflower, he burst into tears.

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As more soldiers in brown uniforms rushed into the room, the fight ended quickly.

All the conscious Rats were told to stand in a line and walk out of the room one by one.

"My head aches," Tigerclaw complained with one hand rubbing his head. "The bump is so big."

"Be grateful you weren't beaten to death." Snaketooth glared at him with tears in his eyes.

"What happened?" Sunflower massaged her neck on which appeared a black line from the rope. "I thought I was dead for sure."

"I'll tell you after we get out of here," Snaketooth shook his head. He was afraid if he spoke too much, he would burst into tears again.

"Your turn." The guard at the door twisted Snaketooth's arms to his back.

Snaketooth didn't resist, and he followed the guard outside. A woman in a white gown was standing in the yard, a paradox to the lethal goddess in black. Her face was covered by a hood, with only strands of curly blonde hair showing.

"You may leave after answering the Lord's questions."

"Yes," Snaketooth faithfully replied, he was in awe of this army's capabilities.

"Have you committed murder?" Her voice was brisk and pleasing as if it was from another world. "How about rape? Robbery?"

Suddenly something struck his mind—she was the one who had warned him without showing herself.

"None of those."

"Alright." She nodded. "Wait at the square for your dinner from His Highness."

Snaketooth stopped after two steps. It took courage to ask, "Are you a witch?"

"That's right." Snaketooth hadn't expected an answer, but to his surprise, the witch gave an upfront reply.

"These are Kanas's followers," Snaketooth continued to speak, biting his lip. "He hasn't been here for four days. He must be hiding somewhere with Bloodyhand! Bloodyhand is the real head of the gang! Never let him go!"

"Don't worry. They can't escape." The woman smiled and said this with a tone of unquestionable confidence.

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"Do you mean... His Highness sent witches to hunt for the head of Rats?" Tigerclaw's eyes were wide in disbelief.

"Not only witches but also many common men," Snaketooth told the bizarre story he had just witnessed. "What I've guessed is right—witches are accepted in His Highness' territory. They can appear in public without worries, and even fight with others." He paused, and then continued to speak with excitement, "If Paper really was sent there, she must be living a fairly decent life."

"Sounds like you want to go there and meet her," Sunflower said, twitching her mouth. "Witches are talented and it's difficult to see them. You might embarrass her if you go to see her."

"Oh..." Snaketooth was stunned for a moment. He knew what Sunflower said was true. He was only a Rat, even if he could survive the winter, his identity would remain the same. Paper must be living a whole different life now, totally out of his league.

"Don't overthink it." Tigerclaw patted him on the shoulder. "Look, it's time to eat."

Chapter 464: The Changes

Many people came for the second meal. Luckily, the three of them had arrived early and were able to secure a position at the front.

When Snaketooth joined the queue, he realized why the fences were built around the wooden stage. There was a speaker chattering about the new policy. He would probably have to keep listening to him until he got his oatmeal.

The crowd moved forward slowly. After waiting for half an hour, he finally reached the back of the wooden stage.

"Give me your right hand." A guard said.

Snaketooth followed the instruction, and the guard stamped the back of his hand.

"Next."

The wooden fence extended on both sides to encircle a large area, but the queuing still continued. Everyone was guided by a guard to take a wooden bowl, receive the oatmeal, go and eat on the side, and then return their bowl. It was hard to believe that ordinary civilians and Rats could be this orderly.

Snaketooth looked at the long queue behind him and felt that this whole thing was absurd. It was as if they were in a solemn ceremony instead of begging for charity.

"What did he stamp on our hands?" Tigerclaw stuck his head out from behind. "I can't wipe it off."

"It's probably meant to prevent us from joining the queue again after we finish our oatmeal," he said with a frown.

Tall tents were set at the perimeter of the empty space, and he could see through the shadows that there were many busy people inside. Heavy wooden barrels were being moved to the long wooden table beside the fence, and it was obvious that the food had just been cooked. As he watched the steaming porridge flow into his bowl, his hands could not help but tremble.

How long had it been since he had a hot meal?

The oatmeal was watery and did not come with vegetables or condiments, but just the golden porridge and its overflowing aroma was enough to make him salivate. Compared with black bread, which contained stones and husks, the food in his bowl made him feel warm again.

Tears were starting to collect in his eyes again.

Snaketooth finished the oatmeal quickly despite how hot it was and licked the bowl clean. Although he wished he could go back and beg for another bowl, he finally dispelled the idea after he saw the surveillance guards. He put the wooden bowl into the designated pot and followed the crowd to exit the fenced area.

There was another wooden stage at the exit, and the speaker was answering questions from the public enthusiastically.

After eating some warm food, the howling wind did not seem as cold as before, and the three of them slowly followed the crowd to the wooden stage.

"You asked why His Royal Highness distributed the oatmeal? That's a good question!" the man said excitedly. "It's because His Highness is determined to eliminate the Rats. Those who are menaced by Rats and those who are forced to comply with the Rats for food can be completely liberated and no longer subject to their threats! At the same time, he did this so that the families that don't have enough food storage can survive the harsh times! This is His Highness' benevolence!"

"You said earlier that the oatmeal would only be provided till the end of Months of Demons, so what happens after that?" someone asked loudly.

The scene suddenly quieted as the people eagerly awaited the answer. Snaketooth also listened attentively.

"It's simple! You can support yourselves!" the speaker said with a smile.

"Support...ourselves?"

"But I don't know how to farm."

"Could you please explain, sir?"

"Don't worry, let me explain to you slowly!" He waved his hand. "After the Months of Demons, Longsong Stronghold and Border Town will merge to form a new city, so the empty areas in between will require a lot of you to reclaim and reconstruct! Only hard work can create wealth, and only hard work can change destiny! You'll have a stable salary, and the money you earn will support you and your family! At the same time, His Highness promised that those who officially have a job will be accepted as citizens of the new city."

His words stirred a wave in the crowd, and Snaketooth felt his heartbeat speed up.

"Yes, I know what you are thinking," said the speaker loudly. "Many of you are Rats, or citizens forced to become Rats. It doesn't matter. You can work for a new life. You no longer have to live in the dark underground, and you don't have to worry about being sent to the gallows. You can rely on your own hands to earn legitimate rewards, whether it's food, clothing, or even shelter!"

"Sir... do we only need to be willing to work?"

He smiled and nodded. "In the future, His Highness will need more than 10,000 people, so... yes, as long as you are willing to work."

Snaketooth suddenly understood something.

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During the next few days, the three of them went to the Central Square for oatmeal at noon every day. More and more citizens heard the news and came to the distributions, until they occupied almost half of the square. Of course, some people didn't go for the food. They just wanted to witness the end of the Black Street Rats.

It looked like there was a festival going on in Stronghold every day.

After the oatmeal was done being distributed at noon, there would be trials and executions on the other end of the square.

As the woman in the white robe had said, none of the Rats could escape their arrest. Snaketooth saw Kanas in one of the trials. His face was pale as he knelt and trembled on the scaffold, no longer domineering like before.

Then, as the iron pipe roared, his head was smashed into pieces.

Apart from Kanas, Snaketooth also heard the names of many other big figures among the Rats.

These included Bloodyhand, Ironcrow, Ripper... they had all been fierce kings in Black Street. Their appearances were not much better than Kanas. Every death of a Rat king was met with warm cheers and chants of "Long live His Highness".

On the fourth day, Snaketooth saw Joe, looking completely recovered. The four of them hugged each other excitedly.

"Where have you been?"

"I don't know," Joe shook his head. "My mind was obscured at the time. When I woke up I was lying in a tent, and my head didn't hurt anymore. I only ate and slept until the fever came down. There were quite a few patients like me in there, drinking oatmeal with dried meat. I ate so much the first time that I almost swallowed my tongue."

"Is there such a good thing?" Tigerclaw stared and said, "Damn, I want to be infected with the cold plague!"

"Anyway, it's good you survived," Sunflower said gladly.

After everyone was done catching up, Snaketooth suddenly said, "I want to look for a job after the Months of Demons."

"Perhaps those nobilities are just fooling us, and there'll be additional requirements," Tigerclaw said. "When they recruited the new Second Army and police members, they asked for a fixed address and a clean record, which means no stealing. So we aren't even in their consideration."

Snaketooth shook his head and did not answer. The things in the bulletin were gradually becoming a reality, and he realized that the "new city" was possibly beyond his imagination. In these few yet long days, he had already felt a change.

If the speaker was telling the truth, would he be able to stay in the new city? If he could get rid of his Rat identity, would Paper feel less embarrassed if he saw her again?

Chapter 465: Inner Peace & Disturbance

Wendy, Scroll, and Spear were sitting in the castle hall, enjoying the top-grade black tea that was imported from the City of Glow.

Wendy took the whistling kettle off the pot hook in the fireplace and poured the boiled well water into a tea cup. Watching the water surface gradually being dyed a transparent orange and sniffing the mellow aroma that came from the rising steam, she felt her whole body become lazy. After blowing on the cup to cool down the tea, she took a small sip. The initial taste was slightly bitter, but it slowly turned into a fresh and sweet taste that rejuvenated her lips and tongue. As the warm liquid flowed into her abdomen, she uncontrollably let out a satisfied groan.

On the other side of the hall, Paper was still fiddling with the Sigil of God's Will. She had already mastered the skill of injecting magic power into the sigil, and was also able to accurately control the output of magic power. But no matter how she tried, she was only able to light up the first magic stone on the sigil.

"Whenever I see her, I'll think of the days in the Witch Cooperation Association," Scroll said emotionally. "At that time, nobody thought that we would all be able to live a life like what we have today."

"If we were able to foresee the future, Cara wouldn't have persisted so stubbornly." Wendy placed her cup down. "It's good that in the future, our awakened sisters won't have to experience the same suffering as we did." As she spoke, she started laughing. "We're probably the last batch of witches who had to suffer."

"Also the oldest batch, which means we'll enjoy the least number of good days," Scroll added while placing her hand on her forehead. "Sounds like we got the worst lot."

"That's why you came back early today just to enjoy a bit more leisure time?" Wendy joked.

"I left only after completing my duties." The latter shrugged her shoulders. "His Highness Roland is away and thus the amount of work is much less than usual. I'm somewhat not used to it."

"Is that so?" Wendy raised her eyebrows. "When His Highness returns, I'll tell him what you said word-for-word."

"Oh... then, for the next exam, I can't promise that you'll be able to understand every question."

"You two have such a great relationship." Spear giggled as she listened to the conversation. "Although I'm not young anymore, I've never enjoyed such a deep relationship with anyone. You two are among the most fortunate of the witches."

"That goes without saying. Not every witch has a powerful father," Scroll said, and drank a mouthful of tea before continuing, "and he would pass on everything he has to his daughter—even in the noble, such people are rare."

"By the way, how's it going in the City Hall?" Wendy looked towards Spear. "I've heard that you'll go there whenever you're free recently."

"There're many benefits of going." Spear exhaled deeply. "This's the first time I've gained insight into a departmental management style that's so well-ordered and demarcated, yet allows the departments to work closely together. Instead of having the ministers of each department conduct their own employee recruitment and compensation, the City Hall takes care of it for them. This way, there's less difficulty in replacing employees, and also allows capable citizens to enter the civil service without hindrance. I've no idea how His Highness conceived this idea."

"She even had a very nice chat with Barov." Scroll jested.

"Ahem, he was simply consulting me about a few questions related to the laws of the noble, which I happened to have a good understanding of," Spear said, shaking her head. "Also, the new laws laid down by His Highness are very unique, and may even be implemented in the Fallen Dragon Ridge. I discussed this with Barov for a little longer."

"Oh? How are they unique?"

"Such as the part regarding the definition of citizenship..."

"Sister Wendy, when will I be able to light up the second magic stone?" Paper had joined in unexpectedly and bawled as she held up the Sigil of God's Will.

"When you're a bit older." Wendy reached her hand out to the young girl. "Come, let me give you a hug."

Paper held on to Wendy's outstretched hand and climbed into her embrace.

Wendy caressed Paper's head as she watched the other two witches discuss the new laws, and felt a sense of calm.

It would be so good if this life could last forever.

At this moment, a guard entered the hall. He first glanced around the room before walking up to the four witches with a slight hesitation.

"Something happened?" Wendy recognized him—he was a personal guard of His Highness.

"Lady Wendy, someone has arrived from outside the castle, and she claims that her daughter has just been awakened as a witch..." The guard said while making a salute. "His Highness has specified that when he's not around, you'll be in charge of such issues."

"What?" The three witches were shocked simultaneously. "A new awakened witch?"

"That's what the person said."

"Quick, take me to her," Wendy immediately responded.

...

At the main gate of the castle, Wendy saw two citizens waiting in the cold wind. One of them seemed about 40 years old, her hair already turned half-white, and the wrinkles on her forehead were deep and long. She was wearing an old-fashioned coat and her stature was slightly hunched. The other person was much younger, about 17 or 18 years old, and she stood reservedly beside the elder woman.

"This's Lady Wendy of the Witch Union." The guard introduced.

"Our greetings, Lady Wendy." The two citizens bowed respectfully.

"They claim to be migrants from the Southern Territory and that they moved into an inner city residential district half a month ago. I've verified their identity cards and found no issue with the information they provided."

"You're the witch?" Wendy looked towards the young woman and spoke in the tenderest voice she could. "What's your name?"

"Lady Wendy's asking you a question." The elder woman tugged on the younger one's sleeve.

"Summer," the latter murmured.

"You're her... mother?"

"Yes, yes, indeed. Her father is still working at the Furnace Area, so I brought her over." The elder woman nodded repeatedly. "Lady Wendy, may I ask if what His Highness stated on the bulletin is true... that witches are entitled to a wage of one gold royal every month?"

"It's true indeed, but she has to be willing to join the Witch Union."

"I..." Summer opened her mouth.

"She's willing, she's definitely willing to serve and dedicate everything to His Highness." The mother interrupted her daughter. "Do we have to sign a contract? When will we receive the money?"

These words made Wendy frown uncontrollably. It was not hard to decipher from her tone that the mother not only treated her daughter as an object for sale, but also thought that the Witch Union was a place of pleasure for His Highness.

Wendy held back her unhappiness and replied placidly, "His Highness is currently handling some affairs in Longsong Stronghold, and I'm not sure when he'll be back. Furthermore, there'll be a few examinations and tests before she can join the Union. You may leave your daughter to our care in the castle, and when His Highness returns, we'll arrange for you to sign the contract."

No matter what, Summer was innocent, and thus Wendy did not want to impose her anger towards the ignorant mother on to her. Even though witches were already accepted by the majority of the town's inhabitants, the refugees who recently arrived in the Western Region still possessed a gross misunderstanding of them.

"I'll entrust her to you, Lady Wendy." The mother made a deep bow and then patted her daughter's head. "Behave well and don't disappoint His Highness."

"Mom, I..." Summer wanted to say something, but the elder woman had already turned and walked towards the exit ramp.

Chapter 466: Reappearance

"Summer, right? Don't worry." Wendy walked up to the young woman and held her hand. "The Witch Union isn't what your family thinks, nor do you have to stay in the castle all the time."

"Really?" Summer asked softly.

"Of course." Wendy smiled. "We stay in the castle because we have nowhere else to go... before His Highness took us in, we lived vagrant lives. Our families were either broken or perceived us as strangers."

You're considered fortunate to have a family." She paused briefly. "Let's go inside, the wind is strong here."

"... OK." The young woman lowered her head and followed Wendy into the castle.

"This's the new awakened witch?" Scroll was already waiting at the door. "What's her name?"

"Summer," Wendy replied, and then look towards the guard. "Can you help me inform Lady Agatha to return to the castle? Tell her that there's a new witch. She should be in the riverside chemical lab right now."

"My pleasure to serve you, Lady Wendy." The guard bowed before he turned and exited.

"Indeed, when Nightingale and Sylvie aren't around, only Agatha is able to distinguish magic power by type and capacity." Scroll nodded in agreement. "What's her ability?"

"We don't know yet." Wendy then caressed the young girl's head and asked, "How old are you?"

"18." Summer became nervous again in front of so many strangers.

"18?" Spear seemed surprised. "Isn't that the age of adulthood?"

"When did you realize that you were awakened as a witch?" Scroll asked. "Tell us your story in detail."

"Just... three days ago, when I turned 18," Summer replied meekly. "That day, my elder brother caught a fish for me as a gift, but it was taken away by my second sister, and only half of the tail was left for me in the end. At night, I hugged my quilt and cried. I then dreamt that the fish returned to my bowl. When I woke up, I discovered that the fish was indeed there, and I also had a new elder sister."

"A new elder sister... what does that mean?" Wendy asked in astonishment.

"One was sitting at the table and eating fish, while the other one was paralyzed with fear on the floor. However, the former soon disappeared together with the fish..." Summer recalled what happened. "At that time, I could feel that... those things that appeared had something to do with me. However, when I told my family about it, I was beaten up by my father and told not to scare my second sister. I really didn't scare her on purpose. Who would think that a dream could become real?"

"That wasn't a dream." Wendy confirmed what the girl said. "It was an awakening call."

Magic power would gather inside a witch's body on the aforementioned Day of Awakening. During this process, a witch would not only be able to feel the weird changes inside her body, but also, for a majority of witches, they would be unable to restrain the strange magic power, causing them to use their newly-gained ability involuntarily. Hence, apart from the extremely unbearable Day of Adulthood, the second highest cause of loss of witches was the Day of Awakening—the consequence of performing magical effects in front of normal people was obvious.

However, Wendy had never heard of a case whereby the Day of Adulthood and Day of Awakening fell on the same day. Albeit this was no doubt possible—the Day of Adulthood was just a more special Day of Awakening.

"After that, my second sister called me a witch and said that I had to leave home. My elder brother retorted that there was no issue with me being a witch as there were many witches in the town. My family quarreled over this..." Summer's voice became even softer as she spoke. "In the end, they decided to send me here."

It thus seemed that even people who had recently arrived from the Southern Territory were already being influenced by the town's propaganda. Fortunately for Summer, she was not tied up and handed over to the church, like many witches were. The unfortunate thing was that her family was ultimately unable to accept a witch. However, Wendy was confident that this kind of situation would be improved over time... the original inhabitants of Border Town were a good example.

After Wendy enquired about a few more details from Summer, Agatha walked into the hall, looking worn out.

"Is this the newly discovered witch?"

Wendy nodded and recounted Summer's identity and awakening experience. "How does the Union test a witch's ability?"

Agatha took a magic stone out of her waist pocket after she was done listening. "It's usually divided into two sections. One is to observe a thorough performance of the ability, and the other is to use the Stone of Measuring to measure the aggregate level of the magic power." Then, she looked at Summer and instructed. "Close your eyes and feel the magic power revolve inside your body."

"Does she need a partner to assist her?" Wendy appeared anxious. "She became a witch only three days ago. I'm afraid that she knows nothing about her magic power."

"No need." Agatha chuckled. "I'm only worried that she's scared."

As they spoke, the magic-filled stone emitted a ray of pale green light that enveloped Summer. A mist gradually appeared around her chest. Its center was pale yellow in color and it seemed like it could dissipate at any time.

"She wasn't lying." After observing briefly, Agatha stopped the operation of the Stone of Measuring. "It's indeed a feature that only occurs when the Day of Awakening and the Day of Adulthood are on the same day. The type of ability is... the summoning type which you're all familiar with. The level of magic power is... extremely low."

"Extremely low?" Wendy winced. "Did such a coincidence also occur in Taquila?"

"The Union had witnessed the awakening of thousands of witches. Something like this was rather common." Agatha replied proudly. "As for witches who awakened only near the end of adulthood, it was as if they never had a Day of Adulthood."

"What?"

"Their magic powers were never able to develop and thus remained in the pre-adulthood form forever. Naturally, they didn't have the derivative skills and steady growth that were unique to adulthood. I don't know if such witches were able to have High Awakenings, but if they were unable to develop, the problems with their magic power would bug them for the rest of their lives. She paused briefly. "We

should have a look at Summer's ability first. After all, magic capacity is only one aspect. The ability itself is the best way to gauge a witch's value."

"Agatha!" Wendy exclaimed while frowning. Every witch should be treated as a fellow sister, instead of being valued based on her ability.

"This is how it's done in the Holy City." Agatha was unmoved. "Sure... I believe His Highness' saying that every ability has its own special use, but they're still distinguishable by their quality."

"What are you... arguing about?" Summer opened her eyes, looking confused.

"Nothing much." Wendy forcibly smiled and said in a comforting voice, "Try to demonstrate your ability to everyone."

"Yes..." The young woman held her breath and slowly reached out her hands. Soon, the four people present were able to see the effects—they saw figures of themselves positioned on the other side of the hall. Two of them seemed to be discussing something, but not a sound was heard. Suddenly, Paper, who had left the hall a long while ago, reappeared beside Wendy and slowly crawled into Wendy's arms, revealing a sweet smile on her face.

Wendy subconsciously reached out a hand to the figure of herself, but her fingertips passed through the figure as if there was nothing there.

Chapter 467: You're Irreplaceable

After the illusion disappeared, the lobby fell into an eerily silence.

After a while, Scroll finally sighed and said, "No wonder your sister fell over in shock. That's quite... terrifying indeed."

"The ability to place an entire group under an illusion is very rare, but not new..." Agatha said slowly.

"When I was in the Union, I knew at least two witches with similar powers, one of which was a Senior Witch from Starfall City."

"How many times can you use this ability every day?" asked Wendy. "Can you control the specific time period that the illusion shows?" According to His Highness' usual practices, there should be a comprehensive test of her ability that sought to understand its characteristics, efficacy and usage.

"About... two or three times," whispered Summer, "and what do you mean by time period? Are you asking how recent the things I show are?" Seeing Wendy nod, Summer stroked her own head in embarrassment. "I've never tested it, but I think earlier things take more effort..."

Wendy couldn't help but laugh. "It doesn't take effort, but the magic power inside your body."

"Magic power?"

"You should be able to feel it flowing inside you like water, or floating inside you like fog. Using your ability requires magic power," explained Scroll. "There're so many things to learn about magic power, and I'll teach them all to you in the future."

"Uh-huh." Summer nodded.

Then, Wendy instructed Summer to use all her powers to display an illusion. This time, the illusion was from a day and a half ago, when the lights were shining in the lobby, and the sisters of the Witch Union were having dinner at a long table. Afterwards, Summer completely exhausted her magic power and lowered her arms, panting, with beads of sweat emerging on her forehead.

Wendy recorded the results of the two tests on a notebook, but she couldn't think of a single use for Summer's ability. "Her illusions can only show the past but can't predict the future, so we'll have to wait for His Highness Roland to return and judge." At this thought, she couldn't help but feel a little frustrated. His Highness once told her that he wanted to make the Witch Union a self-governing organization and to appoint her as the director. However, she wasn't as nearly knowledgeable as His Highness, so she couldn't think of all the uses for her sisters' abilities as well as he could.

After collecting her emotions, Wendy was about to say a few words of encouragement to Summer, when Scroll made a gesture towards her.

The two witches stepped aside, and Wendy asked, "What's wrong?"

"Were you planning on telling Summer that she could stay here if she didn't want to go home?" Scroll asked with a frown. "Did you forget that witches need to be verified before joining the Witch Union?"

Wendy obviously knew that witches needed to answer ten questions about their identity and background under the supervision of Nightingale before being accepted. "But Summer probably didn't lie... Her identification was made by Soraya, and her background matches up. Not to mention that she just awakened and is a non-combat type witch, so even the church won't be able to predict something like this."

"Magic power isn't the only thing that can harm someone. A dagger or a pack of poison can have the same effect, if not better."

"No, how could she possibly..."

"But you can't rule out this possibility." Scroll interrupted. "The City Hall is in charge of resident verification and won't inspect every household, so a sudden awakening is actually the best way of getting into the castle..." She paused. "I know that this possibility is very small, but don't forget that we can't afford to lose His Highness Roland. Lady Tilly is also living in the witch building right now, so if something happens to her, the relationship between Border Town and Sleeping Island will completely splinter, and all of His Highness' work will be for nothing. It's too high of a risk."

"..." Wendy was silent. She knew that Scroll's concerns were reasonable and weren't targeting Summer, but she still found them hard to accept. As the first witch to be awakened in the town under the rule of Roland, Summer was treated as a potential enemy spy, which was simply heartbreaking. After a long time, Wendy said, "I understand. I'll send her back."

"I'll go with you." Scroll sighed.

...

After they left the castle, Summer instantly became much more energetic and began holding Wendy's hand and asking about the witches and the lord.

"What's wrong?" Wendy asked after answering all her questions. "Why are you so glad that you don't have to live in the castle?"

"Uh..." Summer gulped and lowered her head in embarrassment. "I heard that the lord, or His Highness, is a very scary person and ravages all the women around him every day."

"Pfft!" Wendy almost choked in shock. "Where did you hear that from?"

"Isn't he Prince Roland of the Kingdom of Graycastle? I've heard this many times in Eagle City, and there are even folk songs that say the Second Prince is conniving, Prince Roland is lecherous, and only Princess Garcia of Port of Clearwater is a good ruler," whispered Summer.

"I see..." Scroll said with great interest. "This's probably Garcia's way of promoting herself. It's quite unique."

"Is he... not that kind of person?"

"Of, of course not," Wendy said, blushing. "You'll soon learn that he's the lord who is worthy of the witches' trust!"

They came to the residential area where Summer's family lived, walked up to a two-story house, and knocked on her door.

Summer's mother answered the door.

"Mom, I'm back!" shouted Summer excitedly.

"How did you..." She paused and stared at the two people behind her daughter with a panicked look. "Did she do something wrong? Why don't you want her?"

"His Highness hasn't returned yet, so..."

"She can stay in the castle and wait for His Highness to return," said Summer's mother impatiently. "Summer is very obedient. She might be a little slow, but she'll do anything you ask her to do."

"Ma'am, the Witch Union isn't what you think it..." Wendy felt anger rushing into her heart, but Scroll interrupted her before she could finish her sentence.

Scroll took out one gold royal and waved it in front of the woman. "Your daughter is indeed a witch, so we'll sign the contract when His Highness returns. Here's your compensation for the first month."

"Yes, yes." The woman's attention immediately moved on the shiny coin. "Thank you, my lady!"

"Remember, you're now taking care of her on behalf of His Highness. Understand?"

"Yes, my lady, I'll take good care of Summer."

...

After they left the house, Wendy couldn't contain her anger anymore. "How could you pay such a terrible woman? Even if you were paying in advance, you should have paid Summer."

"Would Summer be able to keep the gold royal?" Scroll's answer shocked Wendy. "If she can't keep it for herself, the money will eventually fall into her family's hands; if she can, she'll be completely alienated by her family. That's why I gave the money directly to her mother, so Summer won't have to carry this burden, and it might help to raise her status in her family. She has so much time ahead of her. If we can use the gold royal to buy a better life for her, then it's a good deal."

"..." Wendy pondered for a while and said, "You're right. I was too naive."

The consecutive setbacks greatly discouraged Wendy, and she began to think that she wasn't good enough to lead the Witch Union.

"However, no one cares about them more than you do," said Scroll with a smile, as if she had read her thoughts. "After being in the Witch Cooperation Association led by Cara, I realize that... a trustworthy leader would care about her witches whole heartedly and always put their interests first, regardless of their abilities. That's exactly why you're irreplaceable."

Chapter 468: The Return

After two weeks, Roland was finally on his way home.

After clearing out the four noble families and Black Street Rats with an iron hand, he could, for the time being, start the reform of Longsong Stronghold from scratch. Relief and resettlement measures were underway in an orderly fashion. Although the gold royals and provisions seized from the territories of the Maple Leaf, Wolf, and Wild Rose families weren't as abundant as the ones seized from Duke Ryan, they were still a shocking amount. That was why he could expand the relief program to the entire city unscrupulously, and successfully promote his policies during the porridge distribution.

By the day of his departure, the Second Army had reached its target of recruiting 500 people, and the police department had newly added about 200 new members as well. Roland left half of his soldiers and Vader in Stronghold, so that they could not only manage defenses and maintain order, but could also train the new recruits into usable warriors.

He knew the time for him to implement his policies was limited. If he failed to facilitate the direct communication between the people and the City Hall and did not establish his authority among the masses quickly enough, the ancient power would return to fill the current power gap. As the saying goes, there could be no construction without destruction. He had already completed the destruction, and now it was time to construct and boom Stronghold.

Roland's source of confidence was Border Town, whose population had grown to over 30,000 people, more than half of which were receiving elementary education. This would equal to the size of two modern day middle schools, but it was a shocking number for this era. Furthermore, elementary education was not just about reading skills, but also included basic knowledge of science and politics, as well as a universal sense of patriotism.

The increase in literacy rate would provide him with enough manpower for the revolution. Also, compared to ignorant and meek civilians, a sense of patriotism will enable them to burst out unimaginable power. The town's subjects were each small sparks that would one day set off a great fire in the entire land.

As the sky dimmed, Roland saw the town looming against the darkness.

"Look... what's that?" a member of the nobility shouted behind him.

"A... bridge?" said another person, craning his neck. "My goodness, it's way too long."

"That's impossible! How could such a long bridge be supported with only two pillars?"

"Wait... it seems to be made of steel!"

On the way back, apart from the witches, there were dozens of lower-level nobles on Roland's boat, who had not participated in the rebellion and therefore survived the cleanup.

According to Roland's plan, those lower-level nobles would learn to hierarchically manage the City Hall. After the city construction was officially under way, they would return to Stronghold and help Petrov build the secondary City Hall to carry out and give him feedback on his orders. After the nobles lost their feudal privileges, they would all want to improve, and the only thing they could rely on was their own abilities.

As the fleet passed the steel bridge, Roland heard the astonished gasps of the nobles behind him. Everyone held their breaths and stared as the steel bridge that stretched over the entire width of the river flitted over their heads.

The prince couldn't help but laugh at these people, who had not stopped exclaiming since they boarded the boat. First, they were shocked that a boat made of stone could float on water, and then they were amazed by the spinning wheel and the puffing steam engine. "It's a shame that the town's Three Supplies Project isn't completed," he thought, "otherwise their jaws would drop to the floor when they saw the power of light bulbs."

The boats slowly docked with a sharp whistle. Barov, Carter, and a group of City Hall officials had received the carrier pigeon and were waiting by the shore. When they saw Roland, they set off celebration cannons and welcomed him with a set of formalities fit for a king.

Roland smiled and patted the two men's shoulders, and then he brought Barov over to the Stronghold nobles and introduced everyone to each other. "You're in charge of these people's housing, lives, and education," he said quietly to Barov. "Don't mind their identities and titles, since they are barons at most. There're all kinds of people in the mines, and they all have to work to live an honest living. Train them like you would do to new graduates. I want to see the results as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Highness."

When Roland returned to the castle, all the witches who had heard about his return were waiting in the lobby. Before he could even feel the effects of the heating system on entering the door, a warm body leaped into his arms. He smelled the familiar scent of her hair and patted her head, smiling. "I'm back."

"Uh-huh." Anna raised her head, her blue eyes sparkling with joy. "I've been waiting for you for a long time."

"Me too!"

"And me! Coool!"

Soon, Roland felt an extra weight on each of his arms... He didn't even have to look to know that it was Lightning and Maggie, because no one else would interrupt him and Anna.

"Hey, you two basically went along with him." Mystery Moon complained.

"Yeah." Lily scoffed. "No shame!"

"I'm just glad you're all back safe and sound," said Wendy gently.

"We should celebrate tonight," Scroll suggested.

"Yay! I want ice cream bread!" Andrea exclaimed. "With Ashes' and Shavi's portions, I'll be feasting tonight!"

The last to walk up to him was Tilly Wimbledon.

She stuck out her hand and said casually, "You've had a long journey."

"Thank you." Roland smiled and grasped her extended hand.

...

After a hearty dinner, Roland returned to his office and sighed heavily. Although the castle of Stronghold was much bigger, this small place was much more comfortable.

Just as he was about to sort out the books he brought over from Stronghold, Anna entered the room.

"You came just in time." Roland pointed to the books piled on the rug. "Look, these are my presents for you. They're mostly historical records and legendary tales, while others are secret stories of the Western Region, and they were all taken from Duke Ryan's library. Oh, right, this one is..."

Before he could finish, he felt a pair of soft lips press onto his.

They brought a sweet scent mixed with passion and warm moisture.

"I really missed you," Anna pronounced each word with due stress after she disengaged from Roland, looking deeply into his eyes.

As he stared back at her, Roland felt a sense of warmth swarming upon his heart. "This book..."

"I'll read it later."

"Good idea."

The two became entangled in a kiss.

Chapter 469: Don't Make Her Wait Forever

The next day, Roland walked into his office humming and found that Wendy was already there waiting for him.

"What's the matter?" He stepped over the messy pile of books on the floor and poured her a cup of tea.

"Congratulations, there's a new witch in Border Town." She smiled and told him about everything that happened in the past few days. "If you need, I can summon Summer to the castle anytime."

"The first witch awakened in my territory... She's also the first witch recruited after my public recruitment notice." Roland's face was instantly lit up, but when he heard the second half of the sentence, he asked curiously, "Isn't she in the castle right now?"

"No, because Nightingale wasn't there to verify her identity." Wendy repeated what Scroll insisted. "We sent her home and paid the first month's salary in advance."

"That wasn't a bad idea." Roland nodded. "Tell her to come and sign the contract this afternoon."

"Yes, my lord..." responded Wendy, who was obviously dying to say something else.

"What's the matter?"

"Aren't you angry about people's opinions towards you and the Witch Union? Also..." she paused for a while before saying through gritted teeth, "Also, my ability might not be suitable for leading the Witch Union. Scroll is more experienced and mature than I am, so I think she should be in charge."

"I'm sure you also brought this up to Scroll?" asked Roland with great interest. "And then she told you that you were the best candidate?"

"Huh?"

"I guess I was right..." He sighed. "And I feel the same way. Administration techniques and methods can be learned through experience, but personality is much harder to change. Haven't you realized that the most loved member of the witches, besides Maggie, is you? Also, Scroll is mostly in charge of the education department and will only be busier in the future, so she won't have much time to communicate with the new witches, which happens to be your strength. You should give yourself more credit. I'm an excellent judge of character."

Before Wendy could answer, the prince continued, "As for the misconceptions that civilians have towards the Witch Union, I really have overlooked them. I never thought that this body... no, my previous reputation would spread all over the kingdom." He pondered for a while. "I must fix this rumor as quickly as possible. On top of further advertisement, I also think it's best for the organization to run independently."

"Run... independently?"

"Yes, I want to turn it into a department, just like the City Hall." Roland had considered this issue before. There were only around a dozen witches in the Union now, so he still could manage all of them. However, if it expanded to hundreds of members or were on a scale as big as the Holy City of Taquila with thousands of witches in it, he obviously couldn't handle them all alone. They needed to establish a

governing system that could operate independently and assign witches to different positions, and he would only serve to give suggestions based on their abilities and evolution.

After he explained his thoughts to her, Wendy said hesitantly, "But there're hundreds of people in City Hall, while there're only about a dozen sisters, and they all have their own issues to tend to... Also, how would this change the citizens' opinions toward us?"

"Rumors are like fear because they both come from the unknown. The town residents can accept witches because they personally experience the benefits that Nana and Lily bring," Roland said with a smile. "Allowing commoners to join the Witch Union will not only solve the issue of insufficient staff, but also help the people better understand this organization—voluntary promotion through the people themselves will definitely help improve the people's impression of witches, and your work and contributions to the town will be well-known by the public."

Just like how academies of sciences didn't just hire scientists, a great number of commoners were required for daily errands, administrative duties, and research organization. If he wanted the witches to be accepted by all the people, he would need them to understand each other better, so placing witches and commoners in each other's lines of work made sense.

"I see." Wendy nodded. "This is a pretty good idea. But how do we select these people?"

"Since you'll be operating independently, you'll also have to do your own recruiting and screening." Roland stroked his chin. "You can ask Countess Spear about this, because she should be pretty good at constructing an organization centered around witches. However, there're only a few members in the Witch Union, so you can start by hiring an assistant or staff member as practice. After the Months of Demons, I'll build a new building next to the City Hall, which you can use as the base for the Witch Union."

He didn't mention that since it was the Witch Union, they wouldn't only be in charge of the Witches in Western Region or Kingdom of Graycastle. If he could build the right infrastructure, the Union would be able to immediately cooperate with the witch organizations of all the kingdoms he absorbed.

"I got it." Wendy inhaled deeply. "If you have decided to give me this task, I'll try my best to carry it out."

...

After Wendy left, Roland continued to organize the books from yesterday.

Looking at the pages scattered all over the floor, he couldn't help thinking of last night's fiery and passionate kiss. Anna's fragrant hair, sparkling eyes, and soft body made him tingle with excitement. Although she once burned all of her clothes to the ground without any hesitation when she first met him, he had not been as tremulous as he was then.

It was probably because she was still a helpless little girl back then, and now she was a strong and beautiful woman—in only a year, she had changed so much.

"Maybe I should take the initiative and respond to her..." Roland's thoughts were interrupted when his hands touched someone else's finger, and he realized that Nightingale was handing a book to him. "Let me help you."

"Um..." Roland paused with a start. Last night, when Anna followed him into his office and embraced him, he didn't notice if Nightingale had also followed them into the room from the banquet.

"Don't worry, I left immediately last night and didn't stick around to be the third wheel." Nightingale rolled her eyes. "I guessed that after having not seen you for a long time, she would throw herself at you—she never represses her emotions."

"Is... that so?"

With Nightingale's help, the books were quickly organized and put on the shelves, filling up each vacancy.

"Alright..." Roland stuffed the last book into a remaining vacancy on the shelves. "Thank you."

"Alas. How long are you going to drag this on for? Don't make her wait forever..."

Roland paused and turned around. Nightingale had already disappeared, but her final words still echoed in his ears. Although her voice was very low, he was certain about what he heard.

"... and don't make me wait forever either."

Chapter 470: The New Warship

As Roland walked up to the path leading to the North Slope Mountain, Nightingale's remarks were still ringing in his ears.

He was suddenly enlightened. "That's right," he thought. "I'm no longer just a regular man who only interacts with blueprints all day, and this is no longer the world I used to live in. Now, I'm a lord of a great territory, and I might become a king one day, so if my situation ever changes, I can't use my old approaches to hold myself back."

"I just have to follow my heart," he told himself. "If I force anything because of some insignificant 'principles', it could only result in continuing to hurt Anna and Nightingale."

At this thought, Roland felt a weight had been lifted off his heart. He inhaled deeply and pushed open the backyard door.

Opening the steel door was just like opening his heart and he instantly saw a whole new world.

"Oh... Here comes His Highness!" Hummingbird and Lucia ran up to greet him.

"You're here." Anna smiled sweetly. Roland saw a faint red mark on her pale neck and couldn't help but recall the passionate scene last night. However, since he already made his decision, he didn't mind waiting a little bit more.

"Have you completed the model?"

"Of course." Anna made a beckoning motion. When the two walked out of the yard, they saw a steel boat floating in the middle of a pond surrounded by snow. The steel boat was about one meter long and twenty centimeters wide, seeming much slimmer than those unwieldy concrete boats. The bow had a

distinct thin point, its stern was flat, and the unique part of it was that the hull was covered with overlapping supporting bars as if it were pieced together with thousands of squares.

"This is exactly what I wanted," Roland exclaimed. Compared to the concrete boats that were poured into steel molds, the pure steel boat had a unique delicateness, and the overlapping bars made it look like a work of art. He knew that every piece of this model was cut with Blackfire according to shrunken proportions, without a single junction missing. If this model were brought to the modern world, it would be worth tens of thousands yuan.

"Is this the new kind of boat you want to build?"

"Yes." Roland nodded. "It's also the town's first regular warship."

Originally, Roland planned to use the concrete boats as shallow water gunboats, but he realized that if the steam engines didn't provide enough power, the concrete boats would be too slow. Even when only carrying fuel and crew, the fleet's average speed during the journey to Longsong Stronghold was only eight to nine kilometers per hour. If the boats also had to carry 152 millimeters Stronghold Cannon, gunpowder, and other weapons, their speed could drop to as low as five kilometers. This was equivalent to even less than three knots per hour. This was due to the big dead weight of concrete, which wasn't an issue in simple supply transport, but it was an undesirable feature in warships.

If the town was still suffering from a lack of steel like it was two months ago, Roland would have to put up with this flaw. However, with the production of Star of Steel, the current amount of steel inventory was enough to build a true steel-clad warship. Roland chose the simplest technique of module assembly, which meant soldering pieces of steel boards together with beams to form a large hollow unit, and then connecting these units together to form the hull bottom. This piecing method eliminated the traditional need for a keel, and since the enemy did not have any cannons, he did not worry about defense mechanisms. The sides of the hull were made almost entirely of thin steel plates, thus minimizing the cost and dead weight.

As for the propulsion, Roland decided to use the propeller technology instead of a paddle wheel. The power still came from a steam engine that turned the two propellers by rotating gears. In the blueprint he gave Anna, he also left room for it to be remodeled as a triple-expansion steam engine since he planned to invent a new type of steam engine more suited for boats when he began mass-producing the steel boats.

When they returned to the backyard, Anna began to cut the first steel plate.

The Blackfire in her hand acted like a precise ruler that instantly sliced a thick steel block into seven thin plates, each exactly five millimeters thick.

Next came the soldering. Hummingbird reduced the weights of the steel beams and placed them between two plates, and Anna's Blackfire turned into an extremely thin and hot line and sewed the three components together like thread. This was completely different from her original soldering technique, because her Blackfire heated the steel from the inside, allowing the liquid steel to completely fill all crevices. After the three were completely combined, the beam was lowered by about a millimeter, which meant that its bottom had completely filled the space between the two plates.

A cross made by steel beams could connect four plates, and more crosses could form a hollow box unit. These units were lightened by Hummingbird and transported to the Redwater River, where they were assembled together at the dock.

Meanwhile, Roland's eyes never left Anna's busy figure. Her flaxen hair swayed with her cutting motions like a spirit dancing in the pure white snow.

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In the afternoon, Roland met Summer, the newly awakened witch.

Since she was in his office, it meant that she had passed Nightingale's verification. Wendy had already clearly recorded her ability, so Roland need not perform any more tests but immediately placed the contract in front of her.

Summer held the pen awkwardly for a while before saying with a red face, "I... can't write."

"That's alright." Roland smiled. "You can also sign with your fingerprint."

She carefully pressed her inked thumb onto the parchment. "Is that all?"

"Yes." Roland rolled up the contract. "Wendy has told me every detail about your situation, so even though you signed the contract, you don't have to live in the castle. You only need to come here every day to practice and attend classes. Has Wendy told you about the characteristics of magic power?"

"Yes, Your Highness." As soon as she learned that she did not need to live in the castle, Summer became much more relaxed. "Lady Wendy said that if I don't release the magic power that's accumulating every day, I'll be in great danger on my Day of Awakening."

"That's right, so you have to practice well. I know she'll continue to teach you how to precisely control magic power and its connection with your ability." Roland didn't correct her honorifics because he thought it would be best for a beginner to have some awe. "If there's anything you don't understand, you can ask any member of the Witch Union."

"I understand, Your Highness," she said with her head lowered. "But... do you think this ability is completely useless? I asked Lady Wendy about this, and she said only Your Highness would have the answer."

"Of course not," Roland said with a smile. "You have the ability of a detective, so you'll be very helpful in fighting crimes."

"Detective?" Summer looked confused.

"Don't worry. Soon you'll understand." He summoned Nightingale from her Mist. "From now on, this witch will be your supervisor."